

# Life Through the Eyes of Middle Childhood

More and more kids are thinking – and worrying – like adults. That’s the finding of a study of 6-11-year-olds conducted by Sesame Workshop, a non-profit educational organization that creates educational content for media.

They could be getting too much “adult sprawl” or adult media content in their lives.

The study recruited 233 children from 15 shopping malls in geographically diverse areas such as Memphis, Tennessee; Brooklyn, New York; and Santa Ana, California. The children were asked to name their fears and worries and to assign specific roles to the people in their lives. The study found that children are worrying about many of the same things that adults worry about.

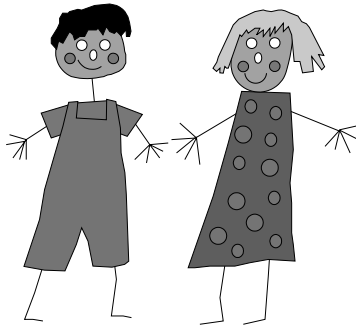
## WHAT CHILDREN WORRY ABOUT MOST:

- **Children are anxious about guns, death, and violence.** These themes occurred in almost 2/3 of the children’s work (cited by 86% of the 9-11-year-olds and 36% of the 6-9-year-olds). The younger children (6-9-year-olds) expressed more “normal” (expected) fears such as being afraid of natural disasters or animals than the older children.

- **Children are concerned that their play spaces will be taken away.**

This theme was evident in response to questions such as “What are your worries about the future?” More than 2/3 of the 9-11-year-olds took pictures relating to pollution and the environment and 65%

were concerned their outdoor space would disappear because of development or neglect.



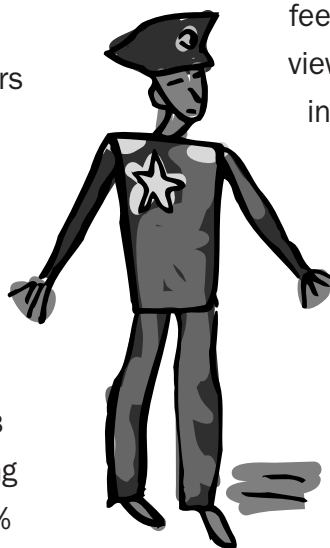
- **Electronic media play different roles in boys’ and girls’ lives.** The “heart of the home” was assigned to the media room by 3/4 of 9-11-year-olds. And older boys chose an electronic item as their “prized possession,” while girls were more likely to choose dolls and toys.

- **Children yearn for relationships with engaged adults, especially extended family.** The children assigned different adults very specific positive roles. Thus parents were chosen as “caretakers” and “heroes,” grandparents were chosen as “wise ones” and “magicians,” and aunts and uncles were also identified as significant for these children.

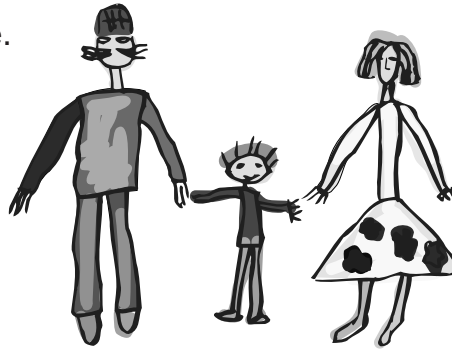
Sesame Workshop concluded from their findings that children are feeling pressure from “adult sprawl” in four particular areas of their lives: violence, urbanization, media, and pop culture. It

is possible that children this age are feeling adult pressures due in part from viewing and experiencing adult content in these areas.

Child development experts describe middle childhood as a time when children form their sense of identity and self-esteem. Confronted with adult concerns, children may be overwhelmed, and may not yet have developed effective coping tools.



Children in these middle years seek comfort from adults. Parents and other adults in a child's life are most likely underestimating their influence. In fact, parent-family connectedness and perceived school connectedness repeatedly have been found protective against various health risk behaviors such as emotional distress, suicidal thoughts, violence, use of cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana, and age of first sexual encounter.



## HOW ADULTS CAN HELP CALM FEARS:

- **Encourage children to develop relationships with adults with whom they can share their fears.** Evidence from different areas of research points to the importance of adults – parents, teachers, extended family members, coaches, and mentors – in a child's life, regardless of the age of the child. Children and teens repeatedly say they want more, not less, input from their parents, especially with tough issues such as sex, drugs, and violence.
- **Help children develop the tools to work through their fears.** Although it is distressing to hear children talk about fears of violence and guns, expressing worries rather than ignoring them is a helpful coping strategy. Actively expressing fears can lead to problem solving and mastery, key skills necessary to develop at this age. The benefit of expression is enhanced when children feel comfortable voicing their concerns, whatever the topic, to a trusted adult.

- **Provide good role models.** Because adults in children's immediate world are so important, they must guard against stereotyping people or reinforcing negative and inappropriate role models. This is especially important with respect to limiting gender role definitions. Exposing children to different people, encouraging individuality, teaching acceptance of differences in themselves and others is crucial to future success and positive relationships.

- **Give children realistic expectations.** Adults can help children develop a realistic internal critic, rather than a harsh one, by helping them withstand their failings. This requires that adults expect children to do their best rather than be perfect in everything they do. Setting goals as well as handling setbacks are useful skills to develop and reinforce.
- **Help children develop media literacy to better cope with "adult sprawl."** Adults must be model media users themselves in order to promote better behavior from their children. Engaging children in discussions about media and encouraging them to be critical media consumers helps them withstand and cope with what they see and hear. Differentiating between real threat and broadcast events and supporting the development of independent opinions rather than following manufactured messages helps children become more confident.